United Nations E/CN.6/2010/NGO/10

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
10 December 2009

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-fourth session
1-12 March 2010
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome of the twenty-third special session and its contribution to shaping a gender perspective in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals

Statement by the International Federation on Ageing, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2010/1.

09-64347 (E) 301209

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Statement

1. The International Federation on Ageing (IFA) is a global network of organizations and individuals that works to improve the lives of older women and men through advocacy and the exchange of information and experience. IFA provides an international forum, including its biennial global conference, for exploring all issues related to ageing, with a special focus on the gender implications of ageing. In addition to the First and the Second World Assemblies on Ageing, IFA participated in the Fourth World Conference on Women and the NGO Forum on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, as well as several of the follow-up sessions of the Commission on the Status of Women. IFA has also actively advocated for efforts by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to include violations against older women's human rights in its deliberations.

2. Female life expectancy at birth has increased by nearly 20 years since the early 1950s and because they live longer than men, women represent a growing proportion of all older people. Unfortunately, in spite of notable progress in some areas, many of the aims and policy objectives for equality, development and peace contained in the Beijing Platform for Action still remain elusive for many older women around the world.

3. In the last 15 years, poverty among older women in the developed world has diminished, owing to women's increasing participation in the labour force, and efforts to eliminate overt forms of gender discrimination in social security and other income maintenance programmes.

4. However, in the developing world, poverty rates among the older population, the majority of whom are women, have actually increased in many countries, owing to the recent worldwide financial crisis, the shrinking of available jobs in the formal sector and the widespread lack of any formal social security arrangements for the vast majority of populations. On a more positive note, the recent and innovative introduction of "social pensions" (namely, non-contributory old age pensions) in several developing countries has made a significant difference in the livelihood of many older women and their families, as these very small pensions often constitute the only regular source of income for the entire family.

5. Within this context, it is important to highlight the dramatic situation of many older women in the developing world who, in the latter part of their lives, have taken on the responsibility of raising their grandchildren. In many instances, these grandchildren have been orphaned by the spread of HIV/AIDS among their parents. According to recently published reports by HelpAge International, even very modest "social pensions" paid to the older person, most often an older woman, make the critical difference, for entire families, between destitution and a more secure existence.

6. While the Beijing Platform for Action does not attribute a high priority to the health status of older women, it does advocate a life course approach with respect to women's health and well-being. We believe that the life course approach, including addressing the most common risk factors for ill health from early childhood to old age, will ultimately yield positive results for the health of older women. In the life course approach it is essential to ensure that primary health care is both age-friendly and accessible to women of all ages. Furthermore, families, communities and governments in both developed and developing countries must intensify efforts to explore the options for cost-effective long-term care which is needed when families are no longer able to care for frail older persons in the final stages of their lives.

7. We urge the Commission to continue to explore policy options for the life course approach when advocating for policies to achieve better health for women, including older women. Fully realizing that caring for both the young and the old most often remains a women's issue, we encourage further exploration of how to value, support and even compensate the unpaid work of vast numbers of women who care for both children and older people.

8. Older women everywhere continue to contribute to their families and communities. As the percentage of women over 60 years of age continues to rise significantly in all countries throughout the world and particularly in the developing world, forward-looking policies that facilitate and encourage their continued involvement in their communities and families, that value their caring activities and that keep them both healthy and strong, are not a luxury but a necessity.

9. Finally, we would like to stress the importance of the human rights of women, including older women. Violence, abuse and discrimination continue to be issues for all women, including older women, and we would like to express our appreciation to the Committee that monitors the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women for taking concrete steps to include human rights issues pertaining to older women in their discussions.